



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

Blade Runner by Ridley Scott; Michael Deeley
Michael Dempsey

Film Quarterly, Vol. 36, No. 2. (Winter, 1982-1983), pp. 33-38.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0015-1386%28198224%2F198324%2936%3A2%3C33%3ABR%3E2.0.CO%3B2-%23>

Film Quarterly is currently published by University of California Press.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ucal.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Reviews

BLADE RUNNER

Director: Ridley Scott. Producer: Michael Deeley. Screenplay: Hampton Fancher and David Peoples. Photography: Jordan Cronenweth. Production design: Lawrence G. Paull. Music: Vangelis. Warners.

In director Ridley Scott's \$30-million noir thriller, *Blade Runner*, set in Los Angeles 36 years from now, sophisticated new robots known as "replicants" have drastically narrowed the gap between humans and machines. Prize creations of the cadaverous, ironic Dr. Eldon Tyrell and his superconglomerate, they not only surpass all people in physical strength and at least match their inventors in intelligence, they also look, sound and feel exactly like real men and women. And they have begun to develop the one element—emotions—whose absence clearly distinguished earlier models from their human twins. Meanwhile, humanity has been doing some gap-closing of its own, for the film's Los Angeles has turned into a festering hell of technological overload and most of its citizens might just as well be robots. In the movie's source, the 1969 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* by the

late Philip K. Dick, a nuclear firestorm devastated the earth; elite survivors and their descendants then moved to "Off-World" colonies, with replicants as their slaves. *Blade Runner* retains this feature as a background story but never mentions atomic war. Its polluted megapolopolis is simply the worst of contemporary LA triple-distilled: earthquake-defying skyscrapers that reek of soullessness and paranoia-inducing secret activities; polyglot Breughel-on-the-River-Styx hordes of punk-Oriental-Krishna-humongous-hustler-lowlifes clustering like heaps of scurrying cockroaches at their bases; air thick and fetid enough to walk on; mural-sized video ads flickering tauntingly from the sides of buildings and the fuselages of drifting blimps—all of it soaked in nearly continuous, doubtless acid-laced drizzle. It's a thronged, crushingly overfreighted world which places every positive quality that the term "humanity" denotes under pressure so cruel and relentless as to threaten the concept with extinction.

As the film begins, four replicants possessing all these qualities have infiltrated this sinkhole illegally: Leon (Brion James), feverish with terror that he will be either killed ("retired") or returned to slavery; the voluptuous, worldly



assassin Zhora (Joanna Cassidy); the waif-punkette “standard pleasure model” Pris (Daryl Hannah), and the group’s leader Roy Batty (the Dutch actor Rutger Hauer), an Aryan-looking genius with a taste for poetry, mockery and murder. Wending their way through the nowhere city, they seek their maker Tyrell, who has cunningly limited their life spans to just four years. Along the way, they encounter a cross-section of the mostly debased humans they were built to mimic and to serve—in particular the gnomish, prematurely aging genetic designer J. F. Sebastian (William Sanderson), who lives by himself in an otherwise deserted apartment block with walking, talking puppet-toys he has constructed to ease his loneliness. Ordered to hunt and to destroy the replicants is “blade runner” Rick Deckard (Harrison Ford). When Tyrell’s aide Rachael (Sean Young) asks him, “Have you ever retired a human by mistake?” he immediately says no but obviously suffers doubts. Which is why he has sunk so deep into the anomie of the classic film noir hero that the barrier between him and his mechanical quarry has become merely a semantic tissue. *Blade Runner* sets out to study the nature of this tissue.

Yet this statement misleads in suggesting a systematic development of story and theme, whereas much of what really interests Ridley Scott seems to lie outside these concerns and amid more elusive matters—mood, tone, texture—for their own sakes. Scott did not take on this project until long after actor-screenwriter Hampton Fancher began adapting Dick’s novel and later got producer Michael Deeley (*The Deer Hunter*) involved in financing it. Important contributions to the look of the film were made by Douglas Trumbull, Richard Yuricich, David Dryer, Syd Mead, and director of photography Jordan Cronenweth. Yet Scott’s stamp is totally, unmistakably on the film; as its other screenwriter, David Peoples, told Paul M. Sammon of *Cinefantastique* (Vol. 12, No. 5–6), “I can’t emphasize enough that Ridley Scott is really the author of *Blade Runner*.” However, the nature of this authorship is not so easy to pin down.

Scott has summed up his approach to movie-making with a couple of notable comments: “The design is the statement” and “To me, a film is like a 700-layer cake.” Thus far, his feature career (*The Duellists*, *Alien*, and *Blade*

Runner) shows a degree of the thematic consistency generally held to be the mark of an auteur. Feraud, the demented Napoleonic officer of *The Duellists* who hounds a colleague year after year over a worked-up slight, renders himself something comparable to the standard idea of a robot: an embittered shell of a human being dead to every feeling except his lunatic obsession. One spaceman in *Alien* turns out to be quite literally a robot, surprising the audience because he has been aping a human being until then as successfully as the replicants in *Blade Runner* do. But the real consistency of the movies is visual: an attraction to intricate, detail-packed images; a fascination with the tonalities of light, especially at dawn, sunset or amid darkness; a predilection for sliding away from the demands of plot and characterization or for prolonging scenes and shots beyond their requirements. Most people probably remember the penumbral lighting of *The Duellists* far longer than the twists of its story, and the spectral-ghastly atmosphere of *Alien* outlives in memory even its revolting monster. If *The Duellists* resonates with more than just visual virtuosity as an end in itself, that is primarily because of its raw material, Joseph Conrad’s “The Duel,” and if *Alien* ends up as a dismally empty experience, chalk it up to a brainless, cattle-prodding script which no amount of wizardry could render meaningful. *Alien*, coldly manufactured to be the hit that it became, suggested that Scott might be pretty soulless himself, spreading 700 layers of frosting on gold or garbage equally, without knowing or caring which was which.

Visually, *Blade Runner* continues in this vein, blending redressed standing sets (a street at the Burbank Studios which has appeared in dozens of other movies), actual locations (the spooky-rococo Bradbury Building in downtown Los Angeles, Frank Lloyd Wright’s Mayan-influenced Ennis Brown house for Deckard’s apartment, a meat-packing vault in Downey for an Oriental eye-maker’s lab), matte paintings, floor and post-production effects, complex miniatures, and photography of the deepest noir into the densest, most arresting futuristic society in screen history. The results are vision after vision of a definitive “terrible beauty,” both urban and human: the opening sweeps over the tenebrous, phosphorescent

city as it spreads from horizon to horizon and spews rolling fireballs into the twilight; creepy, vertiginous views down skyscraper canyons to arterial streets; the streets close up, pulsating with forests of beings who look human but seem robotic; the death throes of Zhora, which hurl her in slow motion through a succession of plate glass windows, with their flying shards throwing jagged flashes of neon in all directions.

It would be easy to extend this list by citing nearly every other image in the film and just as easy merely to swim in this high-tech slipstream. Or, at the other extreme, one could belittle the whole experience along the lines of Andrew Britton's remark in *Movie 27/28*: "There is no more characteristic feature of the 'seventies Hollywood feature than the invitation to purchase the bankruptcy of American capitalism as the ultimate spectacle." Which, if true of *Blade Runner*, would render it as bankrupt as *Alien*. Certainly, although the word is never spoken in the film, the garish decay which it renders so elaborately is capitalist in origin. But its true concerns lie elsewhere.

Robots with "human" qualities, monsters whose "humanity" shames real humans, more-human-than-human (Tyrell's slogan) creatures and machines have long been fixtures of fantasy and science fiction movies. King Kong, HAL 9000, the otherworldly visitors of *It Came from Outer Space*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and *ET—The Extra Terrestrial* all display traits generally held to be "human"—intellect, the capacity for love and other emotional responses, humor, irony, benevolence, consciousness of mortality—while remaining evidently non-human, which basically means without human bodies. Their opposites are beings with such bodies (*I Walked With a Zombie*, both versions of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*) who are not truly human because they have no emotions. So form and feeling, in these and many other movies, are the essential criteria for human-ness. *Blade Runner* mingles the opposites by presenting machines with the full range of "human" emotional powers. As Roy Batty says to J. F. Sebastian, who helped to design him: "We're not computers, we're physical." He proves it amusingly by greeting Pris with a French kiss. When wounded mortally, the replicants do

not spray wires, nuts, bolts, or circuits as the robot in *Alien* does; they bleed and thrash and scream like humans, or like humans in movies of recent years. Quite literally nothing differentiates them from humans, except that they were not born of human eggs and sperm. And during their struggle to gain more life, their "human" traits flower—and, in the case of Roy Batty, touch grandeur.

Scott and the actors work out this motif with a distinctive series of fresh details for each character. Mole-faced, squinting Leon's jumpy interruptions of the sleekly condescending blade runner who interrogates him in the first scene (before we know who either of them is) echo through the subsequent scenes leading up to his death, as Deckard constantly replays them on tape and marvels at such irreducible eccentricity and such genuine terror issuing from an android. But when the two finally meet in combat, Brion James makes Leon's sudden metamorphosis into a lion brutally comic, as he slaps, pounds and throttles the same actor who played superhero Indiana Jones into the middle of next week as though Deckard were just a beefcake ragdoll. Yet Leon's taunting question ("Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it?") reverberates with a passion for life that Deckard, even with his life at stake, cannot quite reach (as he well knows). Joanna Cassidy gives Zhora a rich sense of sexy, worldweary amusement and ruefulness, and Daryl Hannah (a gymnast as well as an actress) colors Pris's little-girl-lostness with sudden spurts of graceful movement and oddly illuminating behavior: approaching J. F. Sebastian as he sleeps and sniffing him or jogging with eerie, poetic relaxation away from the camera before launching her final, lethal assault on Deckard. Each has her signature line, too—Zhora's quiet "No, I wouldn't" in response to Deckard's banter about how surprised she would be to learn the lengths men will go to in order to see a beautiful female body; Pris's soft, poignant "Then we're stupid, and we'll die" after Roy outlines their predicament. And they have their death scenes—Pris, shot in mid-tumble by Deckard, shrieks and pounds shockingly, spellbindingly, as the life force tears itself out of her—as the ultimate signs of their "humanity." Along with J. F. Sebastian, whose "accelerated decrepitude" forces him to share half of their plight, and

his Geppetto-like menagerie of toys (Scott might make a fine Dickens adaptor), these “machines” (by now quotation marks are mandatory for this word also) do what movies at their finest have always had a special ability to do: give us an immediate, sensual feeling for the beautiful diversity which humanity at its finest can achieve.

This holds true even though the movie cannot have what it really needs: actual robots playing the replicants and evoking these same responses from us. As it now stands, we can always fall back on the inescapable fact that these robot characters are really human actors, many reassuringly familiar from other movies like *Turkish Delight* (Hauer), *The Late Show* (Cameron), and *Summer Lovers* (Hannah). Robot characters like Robby in *Forbidden Planet*, Yoda in *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *ET* have won affection from millions, but this is often a cozy, campy affection not nearly comparable to an android striking us as poignantly, ironically, headily, contradictorily as an actor can. Which is reassuring (isn't it?), even if it does prevent *Blade Runner* from becoming as disturbing as it conceivably could be.

On a parallel track, Deckard is initially even less “human” than the replicants are, and arguably he remains so even at the end, though Scott may not have planned it that way. Deckard's Raymond Chandleresque narration tells us that, before the movie begins, he abandoned replicant-hunting as a profession because the machines he was assigned to destroy were becoming so much more lifelike all the time that he could no longer hide behind the euphemism “retirement.” Harrison Ford fits the part almost perfectly because there is often something faintly zombie-like about him on the screen, an aura of deep-down detachment from what he is doing, which he first employed as the enigmatic corporate front man in *The Conversation* and which rises to the surface even when he does dreamboat romantic roles (the unintentionally hilarious *Hanover Street*), square old Us vs. the Nazi Scum numbers (*Force 10 from Navarone*), and perpetual-motion kiddie matinee heroics (the *Star Wars* movies and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*). This time, as in *The Conversation* (where his role is just a cameo), he actively uses this quality for its overtones of thick, stunted apathy and strives—in concert with the film's deliberate,

often glutinous pacing—to convey a palpable sense of a benumbed life force struggling to regain vigor in a poisoned world. And Ford abets the movie's consideration of the human/machine dichotomy by setting himself up, film-noir style, as the first half of a parallel dichotomy—hero/villain—then blurring it out of existence.

But the movie and the performance are at least half-failures for more than just the impossible-to-rectify reason already mentioned. Vangelis (of *Chariots of Fire*) has blessed *Blade Runner* with a fine, anthem-like electronic score which shifts (sometimes a little jarringly) to a sort of 2-AM-in-the-cocktail-lounge bluesiness for Deckard's moments of alcoholic introspection in his bat-cave of an apartment. But, like the images, it sometimes must compete with the narration, which is often grotesquely awful in its strainings after Chandler-like rough diamonds of knight-in-the-sewer wisdom. Thus, Deckard cannot just say that he gave up blade running because annihilating replicants disturbed him; he must mumble that he “had a bellyful of killing.” So that the popcorn munchers in the audience will realize for sure that he is Mr. Good Guy (even though everything in the movie works against this simple label), he must describe his sleazy boss as “the kind of man that called black men niggers.” (What black men? There aren't any in the picture, even in the crowd scenes.) When nailing down the similarity between himself and the replicants by stating that neither were supposed to have feelings, he must add, “What the hell was happening to me?” And his ex-post-facto explanation of Roy Batty's motivation for saving his life during their climactic confrontation, though better written than these examples, nearly kills the poetic resonance of the scene by oververbalizing what is already visually clear. Unconfirmed rumors have it that most of this gunk was plastered onto the film's sound track just before its nationwide premiere last June, following some problems at previews. Scott (who is also said to have been removed from the film during post-production) has denied this, claiming that narration was always planned for the movie but that the precise amounts and placements of it were fluid. Whatever the case, Ford's indifferent, sometimes contempt-tinged readings of most of these lines only makes them all

the more embarrassing. But even if they were better-written, the Chandler “tradition,” especially after *The Long Goodbye* and *Dead Men Don’t Wear Plaid*, is probably a dead letter for contemporary moviemakers, though loads of them (and lots of mystery writers, too) do not seem to have gotten the message yet. The imagery and the conventions of film noir may be nearing a comparable cul-de-sac. Most assuredly, *Blade Runner* is the most overwhelming example in years of the power that they can still generate. But it does not reimagine them enough to break into new territory.

In addition to his murderous encounters with the replicants, Deckard’s relationship with Rachael is meant to be his road back to human responsiveness, but similar difficulties with writing, acting and visual style plague this stratum of the movie also. Take her first entrance from the chiaroscuro of Tyrell’s Xanadu-like receiving chamber: a weird amalgam of neo-forties haute couture glaze (bunned hair, black silk sheath with Mommie Dearest shoulder pads, wine-tinted fingernails that glow as dust-flecked sunlight streams through them) and callow recessiveness thinly veneered with brittle hauteur. Right away, Deckard discovers that she is a replicant herself without knowing it, Tyrell having endowed her with “memories” of a childhood that actually belongs to his niece (who, oddly, never appears). Later, in an effort to deny the truth, she shows him a photograph of her as a little girl with her mother, but he harshly exposes it as a fake. Yet the false photo and the false memory—recurring elements in the linkage of Deckard and the replicants—penetrate his anomie. For his own apartment is full of photographs that are “false memories” in a different sense: images of people and scenes mounted on his piano, some perhaps of his actual yesterdays (he has an ex-wife who calls him “sushi . . . cold fish,” he claims, but we never see her in person, nor is it clear that she is visible in these photographs), but others, some so old as to be virtual daguerrotypes, of people he obviously could never have known. Scott does not really develop this memory/photograph theme to its fullest, though in a *Blow-up*-like scene Deckard uses an Esper machine to find imagery in one of Leon’s similar photos that is invisible to the naked eye. But he does give Rachael a photographic



*Pris (Daryl Hannah) and Batty (Rutger Hauer)
as replicants in BLADE RUNNER*

style of her own. Repeatedly shooting Sean Young in lengthy, brown-toned, velvety close-ups, he makes us study Rachael’s tremors of emotional dawning as they ripple over the surface of her cosmeticized face; it is his most delicate embodiment of frail humanity struggling for re-emergence, which is also how Deckard comes to view it. After she rescues him by shooting Leon, she plays his piano tentatively while he sleeps, and he awakens to whisper, “I dreamed music.” “I remember lessons,” she murmurs, “but I didn’t know whether it was me or Tyrell’s niece.” Her uncertainty is the fragility of everything in the lost past of every person, all the forgotten things that never become catalysts for recollection, all the memories either distorted or altogether false. Rachael’s half-open, half-afraid stare at Deckard after he tells her, “You play beautifully,” then moves to kiss her, is Sean Young’s most moving moment in the film.

However, she does tend to wilt somewhat under all the cinematic pressure that the director puts on her with his Von Sternbergian lighting posings; her screen persona (judging also from *Stripes* and *Young Doctors in Love*, though both are featherweight comedies) is oddly complementary to Ford’s in its nougat-soft dreaminess. But even if she were more electrifying or perhaps older and more experienced as an actress, Rachael would remain too vague a character. Just as Scott and the writers fail to cover Deckard’s Chandleresque lingo by making it a feature of a “fake” past which he has chosen to adopt, they also miss connecting Rachael’s odd manner and garb to her



Deckard (Harrison Ford) and Rachael (Sean Young) in *BLADE RUNNER*

implanted memories. It's as though Scott simply splurged on these touches without caring if they had resonant meaning. And it is needlessly unclear why Rachael is so emotionally virgin. Even if Tyrell has kept her under close surveillance in his pyramid, hasn't she, being so close to flesh and blood, felt stirrings of flesh and blood feelings and tried to act on them? She never becomes as vivid as the other replicants. And the ending, her escape from Los Angeles with Deckard (another reported last-minute change, pasted together out of what are said to be aerial outtakes from *The Shining*), when his narration suddenly reveals that she is not programmed to die in four years like the other replicants, finishes off whatever poignance still remains in her situation.

Despite all this, *Blade Runner* achieves a dazzling stretch of power just prior to this unfortunate conclusion, mainly thanks to Roy Batty. Rutger Hauer makes him alternatively campy, eloquent and lethal, mixing his qualities until we almost forget that we are dealing with an android. When he finally faces Tyrell and demands "more life, fucker," then displays his mental prowess by desperately suggesting genetic solutions to his terminal flaw, only to have Tyrell dismiss them all, his Aryan menace (frequently displayed through low angles which place him against the cosmos for a backdrop) takes on real stature. His murder of Tyrell—with the camera concentrating on his contorted face as he releases his passionate

despair—is a climax of nothing less than Shakespearean horror and majesty: by crushing the life out of Tyrell, the only one who could possibly extend his own (conceivably all the way to immortality), Roy is, in effect, killing God and committing suicide simultaneously. After mockingly chasing Deckard through the Bradbury Building (the film's final destruction of the hero/villain dichotomy), then saving him from sure death, he awaits his own. As his machine-made pulse fades, he looks softly at the prostrate Deckard and muses, "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe . . . Attack ships on fire off the shoulders of Orion . . ." Then, noticing the rain moistening his face, he formulates the metaphor: "All these things will be lost in time . . . like tears . . . in rain . . ." The movie brilliantly turns the obviousness of this final comparison to its advantage by highlighting, through Hauer's hesitant tone and his faraway stare, Roy's need to say it explicitly before he dies, as a final expression of his best sensibility. As his hands atrophy and release a pigeon he has been holding into the sky (in a kind of stop motion), the distinction between human and machine no longer has any real meaning.

Thus, *Blade Runner* shades into a meditation on the transience of not so much life as existence, the existence of *everything*, animate and inanimate. These two categories, like human/machine and hero/villain, also break down, until both have equal weight and value. This is the ultimate significance of Scott's frame-packing style. It explains why many of the film's most incidental-seeming vignettes—a harp-scored tracking movement away from Roy and Leon slantwise across a street where cooking fires flicker and a line of bicyclists pedals towards and past the camera, mangy street urchins exulting in the muck over the theft of a hubcap from Deckard's car, lingered-over shots of plumaged showgirls backstage at a dive—are so eerily stirring. Whether or not Scott has formulated anything like this notion in his mind (he is given to calling entertainment his only directorial goal), he has made it real, however imperfectly. *Blade Runner* is a crippled but nonetheless magnificent edifice of a film and, during this sad period for Hollywood moviemaking, damned near to an outright miracle.

—MICHAEL DEMPSEY